

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please cancel claims 9-12, and add new claims 13-24 as follows.

1. (Original) A clamp comprising:
 - a handle assembly;
 - a gripping assembly having a pair of jaws that can be opened and closed to grip an element, the pair of jaws being parallel to each other when they are opened and when they are closed; and
 - a flexible shaft having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly.
2. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein the pair of jaws are parallel to each other at all times, including when the jaws are being opened and being closed.
3. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein the shaft is completely flexible without any external support, yet is capable of withstanding axial loads.
4. (Original) The clamp of claim 3, further including a rigid element that can be placed in a first position where the rigid element supports the shaft in a manner where the shaft cannot be bent, and in a second position where a portion of the shaft can be bent.
5. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, further including:
 - a cable carried within the shaft, the cable having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly; and
 - wherein the gripping assembly includes:
 - a jaw housing;
 - a cable terminator movably retained inside the jaw housing and securing the distal end of the cable; and
 - a link that pivotably couples each jaw to the jaw housing.
6. (Original) The clamp of claim 5, wherein each link is also pivotably coupled to the cable terminator.

7. (Original) The clamp of claim 5, wherein each link is a first link, and further including a second link that pivotably couples each jaw to the jaw housing.

8. (Original) The clamp of claim 1, wherein each jaw receives an insert, and wherein a space is defined between the insert on each jaw when the jaws are in the closed position.

9-12. (Canceled).

13. (New) A clamp comprising:
a gripping assembly having a pair of jaws that can be opened and closed to grip an element;
a handle assembly; and
a shaft assembly having:
a flexible shaft having a proximal end that is operatively coupled to the handle assembly and a distal end that is operatively coupled to the gripping assembly; and
a rigid element having a proximal end that is removably coupled to the handle assembly, and a distal end that is removably coupled to the gripping assembly;
wherein the rigid element supports the shaft in a manner where the shaft cannot be bent when the proximal and distal ends are coupled to the handle assembly and the gripping assembly, respectively, and wherein the shaft can be bent when either the proximal end or the distal end of the rigid element is removed from either the handle assembly or the gripping assembly, respectively.

14. (New) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the handle assembly includes means for locking the pair of jaws in a closed position, the locking means having means for adjusting the locking force of the jaws.

15. (New) The clamp of claim 14, wherein the handle assembly includes a first handle piece and a second handle piece, and the locking means includes:
a ratchet rack pivotally coupled to the first and second handle pieces, the ratchet rack having a tooth; and
a ratchet that is normally biased towards the ratchet rack, and having means for engaging the tooth on the ratchet rack.

16. (New) The clamp of claim 15, wherein the adjusting means includes the engaging means, with the engaging means having an elongate member that has a helical groove that also defines a continuous path that includes a plurality of teeth, with the tooth of the ratchet rack adapted to engage the groove and to travel along the continuous path.

17. (New) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the flexible shaft is capable of withstanding axial loads when the plurality of telescoping tubes is in the first position.

18. (New) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the rigid element comprises a plurality of rigid telescoping tubes that can be oriented in a first position where the telescoping tubes are nested within each other adjacent to and external of the handle assembly, and in a second position where the telescoping tubes are fully deployed to completely cover the flexible shaft.

19. (New) The clamp of claim 18, wherein the plurality of telescoping tubes has a distal telescoping tube that is removably coupled to the gripping assembly when the telescoping tubes.

20. (New) The clamp of claim 18, wherein the plurality of telescoping tubes has a proximal telescoping tube that is removably coupled to the handle assembly.

21. (New) The clamp of claim 18, wherein the plurality of telescoping tubes has a proximal telescoping tube and a distal telescoping tube, with proximal telescoping tube having a larger diameter than the distal telescoping tube.

22. (New) The clamp of claim 18, wherein the plurality of telescoping tubes has a proximal telescoping tube and a distal telescoping tube, with proximal telescoping tube having a smaller diameter than the distal telescoping tube.

23. (New) The clamp of claim 18, wherein the plurality of telescoping tubes are non-rotational.

24. (New) The clamp of claim 13, wherein the jaws are non-rotational and are capable of supporting axial loads, side loads, moments, and torques.